DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 058 649 24 EA 004 007

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TITLE School Financial Elections. Educational Management Review Series Number 3.
INSTITUTION Oregon Univ., Eugene. ERIC Clearinghouse on Educational Management.
SPONS AGENCY National Center for Educational Research and Development (DHEW/OE), Washington, D.C.
BUREAU NO BR-8-0353
PUB DATE Feb 72
CONTRACT OEC-0-8-080353-3514
NOTE 12p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Boards of Education; *Bond Issues; *Educational Finance; Literature Reviews; Public Relations; *School Budget Elections; *School Community Relationship; Superintendent Role; *Voting

ABSTRACT

This review surveys recent literature that reflects a wide variety of research techniques and methods. These writings, previously announced in RIE, should provide administrators with some insights into variables that affect the outcome of school financial elections. Divided into four major parts, the review includes literature that (1) deals with the factors affecting the success or failure of school bond elections, (2) describes some of the influences on voter behavior and the effects of school-community relations, and (3) provides guidelines for launching school finance campaigns. (Author/EA)

ED058649

EDUCATIONAL MANAGEMENT REVIEW SERIES
EA 004 007
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February 1972 Number 3

School Financial Elections

PHILIP K. PIELE

In examining the literature one may see that the school administrators, in their professional journals, are proposing the use of a multitude of techniques which have not consistently been proven to be either advisable or inadvisable. One of their greatest concerns is getting the electorate out to vote, yet studies have indicated that indiscriminate solicitation of the voters does not necessarily lead to school bond issues passing. The majority of empirical studies which have been done are overlapping and incomplete. Despite the copious literature available on school bond issues, few conclusions have been established.

Beal, Lagomarcino, Hartman, and Murphy (1966)

During the fifties and early sixties voter approval of school financial issues, whether annual operating budgets or serial bonds for new schools, was viewed by most school administrators as a mere formality. Beginning in the late sixties, however, voter support for school financial issues—particularly bonds—declined steadily. During the 1969 fiscal year, for example, voters approved only 57 percent of the bond elections held in this country. The outlook for the seventies is no brighter; less than 50 percent of the school bond elections held during the first quarter of 1971 were approved by the voters.

Clearly, there has been a change in voting patterns for school financial elections in this country. It is obvious, therefore, the school administrator today needs to understand something about the factors influencing this change. The literature included in this review, written during the last decade and employing a wide variety of research techniques and methods, should provide the administrator with

some insights into variables that affect the outcome of school financial elections. Divided into four major parts, the review includes literature dealing with factors affecting the success or failure of school bond elections, influences on voter behavior, effects of school-community relations, and guidelines for school finance campaigns.

All of the documents reviewed are available from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service. Complete instructions for ordering documents are given at the end of the review.

Factors in the Success or Failure of School Bond Elections

A series of reports based on research sponsored cooperatively by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and Iowa State University examine school bond elections held in Iowa during a five-year period, and particularly those elections in which a portion of the bond issue was requested for vocational education purposes. To determine causal factors in the success or failure of school bond elections, a study was made of school bond election results from 1960 through 1964 in the 209 Iowa school districts maintaining a public high school, junior high school, or community college. Seventy-nine percent of the reporting districts (154 of 195 total) successfully passed bond elections during that five-year period. The data, obtained from a questionnaire mailed to the 195 school district superintendents, were analyzed by several techniques, including chi-square, multiple regression, and analysis of variance. Factors evaluated include voter turnout, existing situational variables, characteristics of the bond proposal, election strategy and timing, communications techniques used, and perceived reasons for passage or failure of the bond issue.

In a data book based on the Iowa research, Beal, Lagomarcino, Hartman, and Murphy (1966) review literature and research studies dealing with recommendations and findings related to school bond issue elections. A section provides a theoretical orientation and describes the sampling and field procedures used. The data obtained from the 195 Iowa school superintendents involved in school bond elections during the five-year period are analyzed and presented. There is clear indication that superintendents perceive cooperation between themselves and the board of education as more important in passing bond elections than the use of a citizens' advisory committee.

Hartman and Beal (1968) studied the 195 Iowa superintendents' perceptions of the roles of various individuals and groups (superintendent, board of education, superintendent-board, lay committee, and consultant) in bond elections. Their results do not support the contention that involvement of large numbers of individuals increases the probability of bond passage. As perceived by the superintendents, cooperation between the superintendent and the board of education is the most important variable affecting the success of bond elections.

Writing from the same research project, Hartman and Bashor (1967) analyze the data collected from the 195 districts to determine the relationship between variables of demography, economy, election history, and communication and the percentage of affirmative votes in school bond elections.

Major findings indicate little relationship between school bond election outcome and the traditional techniques (the variables used in this study) presented by educators and reporters as essential in securing school bond passage. The authors conclude that the type of community decision-making in school bond elections is complex enough to require more precise sociological, social-psychological, and communication theory than was used in this study.

A second phase of the Iowa study analyzed the effect vocational education requests have on bond elections. Beal, Hartman, Lagomarcino, and Price (1966) present data collected in interviews with superintendents of twenty of the twenty-four districts in which part of the bond issue was assigned for vocational and technical purposes. These interviews yielded information for a descriptive analysis of

1. perceived importance of the vocational education portion of the total bond election campaign
2. changes in vocational education offerings since the elections
3. characteristics of the communities and school districts
4. attitudes toward the recently organized "area vocational schools" authorized by the federal Vocational Education Act of 1963

Tabulated information covers facilities for which bond issue approval was requested, community perception of the role of vocational education in the school curriculum, and each superintendent's perception of voter concern about vocational education costs and voter knowledge of specific vocational education programs. The authors conclude that superintendents felt community attitudes toward bond issue elections were largely unaffected by inclusion of vocational education needs in the bond proposal.

In another report on the vocational education research, Beal, Lagomarcino, and Hartman (1966a) analyze interview responses of the twenty Iowa superintendents to identify the variables associated with election success or failure and to recommend strategies relative to bond issue elections for vocational education in Iowa school districts. The percentage of registered voters and communication techniques used were not correlated with election outcome. Economic variables dealing with millage increase and total millage appeared more important than the total amount of the issue in increasing voter turnout. Districts that had passed a bond issue in the five-year period were most likely to pass another presented during the period, and unsuccessful attempts were most likely to be followed by further failures. Little or no association was observed between a favorable vote and district demographic characteristics or economic variables.

Superintendents of successful districts evaluated newspaper coverage as more favorable and Parent Teacher Association involvement as more important than did superintendents of unsuccessful units. Vocational education bond issue proposals did not seem to affect the election outcomes. The authors conclude that data collected by the present survey techniques are not sufficient to predict the outcome of school bond issues.

A summary report by Beal, Lagomarcino, and Hartman (1966b) presents the highlights of the Iowa study. Primary findings include: the use of most communications media was negatively related to election success; a community norm of bond election passage or failure appeared to be operative;

the differentiation between elections for vocationally related purposes and those for other purposes was minimal; and the lack of trends and significant correlations indicated there was as much variance within as between districts studied.

Two seminar papers review issues affecting successful and unsuccessful bond campaigns in four California junior college districts. In the first paper, Overbeck (1969a) examines factors that produced defeat of bond issues and the actions taken by administrators of the junior college districts to offset those factors. Relevant findings from previous studies on school bond elections are summarized, and the legal and fiscal context in which new California junior college districts operate is described. The author considers that the most significant finding of the study is the degree to which California's new district override tax law influences the development of new junior college districts. Several recommendations for other new districts contemplating bond elections are based on the conclusions of the study.

In the second paper, Overbeck (1969b) reviews bond election campaigns in junior college districts and concludes that the election has a better chance of success if the voters are told that no tax increase will result from a yes vote; the district in question is a going concern at the time of the election; controversy and vocal opposition are avoided; the editorial support of local news media is won; the college leadership seeks personal contact with the community; and, a popular site has been selected. He concludes that the chances for a successful bond election appear to decline as voter turnout increases, and that the strongest support for school bonds comes from parents of children in school and from new residents of the area. The amount of the bonds to be floated has little effect on the election's results; however, the question of a tax increase may have significant effect.

Influences on Voter Behavior

To determine voting intentions on a future bond issue, Roper and Associates (1968) surveyed community attitudes toward education and the West Valley Junior College in the Bay Area of California. A random sample of 750 adults stratified on the basis of age, sex, and employment was questioned to determine their attitudes toward the importance of a college education for high school graduates in the college district, college plans for their children, their attitudes and knowledge about the college, and their voting intentions on a future bond issue. From answers to a thirty-seven item questionnaire, the following conclusions were reached:

1. the chances of passing the bond issue were excellent if a campaign was well mounted
2. stated intentions indicated that 75 percent of those voting favored the issue
3. since those opposed to the issue were more certain of their intention than those in favor, an immediate election was not recommended
4. because persons familiar with the college were much more likely to favor the issue, an educational campaign before the election would be beneficial
5. in light of the community support for higher education, the number of pre-college-age children in the area for whom college plans had been made (nearly half for a two-year college), and the high regard of the community for the college, the college was in an excellent position to wage such a campaign

In a study of San Mateo voters, Witt and Pearce (1968) examined preelection reac-

tions to a combined tax and bond proposal providing additional junior college funds. They proposed to determine how many would vote for or against the proposals, to identify issues important to voters in making their decisions, to characterize those voting yes or no to learn who needed additional information, and to determine the voters' knowledge of the issues. Before the election, spot polls were taken to find out why people did or did not support the proposals. Conclusions from these polls include: (1) although both issues would pass, more voters favored the bond than the tax proposal; (2) certain issues emerged that should be stressed in presenting the proposals; (3) about two-thirds of those interviewed rated the college well, mostly through personal contact; (4) certain areas of the county were less agreeable to the proposals; (5) voters more than fifty years old (without children under twenty-one) were less in favor, particularly of the tax proposal; (6) white-collar and professional people showed more favorable response than blue-collar workers, housewives, or retired people; (7) those in favor of the proposals were more likely to vote, and (8) voters who felt they knew about the issues were more likely to vote for them.

In a comparative study of inconsistent voter behavior in a repeat school budget election, Schoonhoven and Patterson (1966) analyzed data from questionnaires sent to a 10 percent sample of voters in two Oregon school districts who had not voted in a previous unsuccessful school budget election but who had voted in a subsequent successful election. In each district, one-fourth of the voters attributed their failure to vote to forgetting or being unaware of the election, and a majority in both districts felt they had legitimate reasons for not voting previously and seemed determined to use their vote to affect the final outcome. Despite demographic differences between the districts in level of schooling completed, occupation, income, period of residence, political affiliation, and religious preference, reasons for voting positions were similar in both districts. Statistically significant relationships between positive voting and having children in school were noted in both districts, and positive voters in both districts tended to have completed relatively more years of schooling. Significant findings in one district, not supported by the second district, related positive voting to persons under forty-five years of age, persons of higher occupational skill, persons with income-producing spouses, and persons whose family incomes exceed $5,000.

Dillingham (1969) studied the response of voters to a reduction in school services. After the failures of a property tax levy submitted to Cincinnati voters first in November and again in December of 1966, the school administration and board announced the reduction of summer school services and the elimination of both the kindergarten and interscholastic athletic events. To determine the effect of these reductions on voter support for the schools, a stratified sample of 520 registered voters was interviewed in the fall of 1967. The actual vote in the 1966 elections and the intended vote in an upcoming levy election were compared for groups of respondents varying in age, marital status, home ownership, children in or out of school, interest in athletics, religion, attitudes toward racial integration, income, education, and race. In general, the reduction of school services appeared to increase support more among those respondents

who were placed in a conflict situation by factors of cost and interest in the school system (for example, property taxpayers with children attending school) than among those respondents whose vote did not involve conflict. Specific findings are presented in eighty-four cross-tabulations and in the appended straight tabulations of the interview responses.

In an empirical investigation of the relationship between certain fiscal and economic factors and voting behavior in school budget elections in New York State, Goettel (1971) tested the proposition that three factors influencing voter behavior in nonpartisan school budget elections are fiscal decisions made by boards of education, fiscal commitments uncontrollable by boards of education, and expenditures made by other governmental units. From analysis of the data, six conclusions are drawn:

- approximately one-half of the variance in voter participation and dissent is not explained by these factors
- the most consistent stimuli of participation and dissent are uncontrollable by boards of education in the budget election year
- teacher salary increases do not affect participation and dissent
- nonschool fiscal and economic factors are not important predictors of voter behavior in school budget elections
- the influence of fiscal and economic factors on electoral behavior differs according to the school district's location
- participation and dissent in school budget elections are highly related

To explain the amount of variance in electoral behavior left unexplained by the fiscal and economic factors included in the study, Goettel suggests that the level and manifestations of conflict within a school district are worth examining. Latent negativism existing within communities may be stimulated as much by citizens' perceptions of the effectiveness of local schools as by the costs of education. Three nonfiscal factors that could activate such negativism are community conflict over a nonfiscal educational issue, organized opposition to the school board, and contests for seats on the board of education.

EFFECTS OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

In a nine-year research project, the Institute for Communication Research and the School of Education of Stanford University studied the effect of school-community relations on public support for education. The results are reported in a series of five volumes. Based on a nationwide sample of voters, school officials, and other community leaders, these reports examine communication patterns, citizen participation, and voter behavior in school bond, tax, and board elections.

In the first volume, Carter, Greenberg, and Haimson (1966) examine data obtained on the nature of informal communication about schools. From an analysis of over two thousand reconstructed conversations held by fifty adults in each of five school districts, questionnaire response data were obtained to measure flows of information and of influence in the districts. Scoring each respondent for conversation scope, initiative, direction, influence, conduct, and content, the authors attempt to describe persons who talk about schools, kinds of persons who engage in different amounts and kinds of conversation, relationships between flows of information and influence, different ways

in which people carry on conversations, and networks of informal communication that exist in school districts. Two respondent interest orientations, as parent and as citizen, accounted for much of the difference between communicators and noncommunicators. Correlated with these orientations were demographic, participatory, and attitudinal characteristics for each respondent. Two-thirds of the informal communicators were found to be school parents, one-sixth school people, and one-sixth others (preschool parents, private school parents, postschool parents, and nonparents). Both information and influence flows appeared to be the sum of numerous social encounters, with no coherent structure of communication channels.

The second volume by Carter and Chaffee (1966), defines major variables relating to communication between public schools and their communities and studies financial support as the primary content of the communication process. From interviews with a 1964 national quota-probability sample of fifteen hundred citizens twenty-one years of age or older, respondents were related positionally to three role sets within a context of consumer roles: (1) parental status—preschool parents, public school parents, private school parents, postschool parents, and nonparents, (2) utility—opinion of educational value received in return for taxes paid, and (3) adult's own educational experience. Six out of seven citizens interviewed thought children were not getting all they should out of education, either for eventual economic benefits or for social and intellectual competencies.

Communication through mediating agencies (agencies available to help citizens learn what is going on in the schools) was found to be relatively ineffective, since the same individuals who participate actively are those who make use of the mediating agencies. The mass media—newspapers, radio, and television—are sometimes used by citizens who do not have high levels of participation. While parents of public school students participated in school affairs more than other parental status groups, overall citizen participation was low, with three out of four respondents saying nothing could increase their interest in school matters. Eleven suggestions are made for increasing communication effectiveness in securing support for public education.

In the third volume, Carter, Ruggels, and Olson (1966) identify 860 variables for assessment against four summary criterion variables: (1) acquiescence, the degree to which voters in a school district view financial issues favorably, (2) participation, the degree to which voters exercise their right of review by voting, (3) understanding, the degree to which informed observers similarly perceive school-community relationships, and (4) quiescence, the degree to which controversy and conflict are lacking in the school district. Findings of the study are based on data from a random sample of 180 school districts with 150 pupils or more and from the responses of ten persons holding key roles in each district—superintendent, board president, four other board members, teacher representative, parent representative, mass media representative, and an interested citizen. Practical uses of the study's identification of 256 variables as significantly related to one or more of the four criterion variables include suggestions for both diagnosis and solution of problems in school-community relations.

Carter and Ruggels (1966) in volume 4,

also define the four criterion variables—acquiescence, participation, understanding, and quiescence—as indices of school community relations and focus their analysis on the nature of the interaction process between schools and their communities. Employing standard statistical measurement techniques, including factor analysis, they determine correlations among the four criterion variables, as well as correlations of the 256 significant variables with each of the criterion variables. From the study's findings, the authors formulate suggestions for effectively using determined patterns of support and nonsupport.

The last volume of the series, by Carter and Odell (1966), condenses the previous technical studies into four reports, describing the purpose, theoretical framework, data-collection methods, most important findings, and implications of each. The summaries focus on informal communication about schools, the agents and agencies that mediate the flow of information between citizens and schools, the structural aspects of school-community relations, and the process of school-community relations, with special emphasis on communications and the enlistment of public support for schools.

Guidelines for School Finance Campaigns

A Texas Education Agency (1966) report makes available to school boards and administrators some materials that have been used successfully by a number of Texas districts in promoting school bond elections. Suggested as one of the first steps an administrator should take is the evaluation of factors important to the selling of bonds: stimulating interest of investment dealers thereby increasing competition for bonds; preparing and circulating among bond dealers a complete, accurate prospectus; answering all inquiries promptly and accurately; and, if not rated, investigating the possibility of becoming rated. Precampaign measures should establish lines of communication, carry the campaign to the public through mass media, public speakers, and citizens' committees, and stimulate community action by a public relations program. The report offers samples of speeches, brochures, graphs, blueprints, financial reports, and other campaign materials.

Anderson (1967) reports the efforts of ten high school superintendents in Dupage County, Illinois, to persuade taxpayers from diverse districts to vote for the establishment of a junior college. After studying the state master plan, the superintendents and the board members of each district hired a firm to make a feasibility study. The boards selected nineteen citizens for the steering committee, which had to get out the vote three times—to establish the college district, to elect the board, and to authorize $10 million in bonds for site and buildings. A petition for the election was circulated and addressed to the county superintendent of schools. Business concerns contributed funds for the campaign, and district school boards submitted names for a citizens' committee in each area. The chairman of each committee followed clear directives and an exact timetable for club addresses, neighborhood meetings, and block-to-block canvassing, and a publicity committee handled speeches, literature, and advertising. Sustained publicity and personal solicitation of voters assured passage of the enabling act, the election of board members, and the bond issue.

Suggestions for a successful campaign, based on examination of three defeated library bond issue referendums in Illinois, are offered by Lindahl and Berner (1968). They report on the sequence of events and administrative decisions leading up to voter action on public library bond issues in three Illinois cities. In two cities, voters defeated the bond issue referendums and in the third approved the bond issue in its second referendum. Descriptions of the campaign processes precede a discussion of each element of the processes, with results of the analysis generalized and presented as flow charts, along with other conclusions drawn from the three experiences.

As prerequisites for a successful campaign, the authors suggest: anticipation of opposition; use of a citizens' committee; good knowledge of local politics; approach to the community power structure before the campaign opens; use of opinion polls, advice, and technical assistance from the American Library Association; use of professionally trained public relations personnel; and continuous effort to explain and demonstrate how a public library can serve its community.

A handbook published by the National Education Association (1969) urges that local associations share the contents with school administrators and citizens as the first step in a cooperative effort for voter support in school finance campaigns. Advice is given on planning the campaign, involving the staff and education association, developing strategy, identifying the voters, expressing a positive theme and message, financing the campaign, running the campaign timetable, choosing the right communication channels, focusing on the grassroots work, organizing and staffing the campaign, selecting the basic campaign tools, handling the opposition and following up with postcampaign procedures. Included are sample materials used in school tax election campaigns, ranging from an organization chart to sample letters designed to reach various groups of voters.

Summarizing general research findings in campaigning for school funds, the National School Public Relations Association (1969) offers a guide for those concerned with presenting the financial needs of the schools to the voting public. The importance of understanding the attitudes of voters toward school spending is stressed. Techniques, tools, and practices that have been used with success are reported, including early citizen involvement, timing of the election, choice of the campaign coordinator, use of community groups, and use of communications media. The document provides a precampaign checklist, an organization chart, and a resource list of thirty-six articles, reports, books, and monographs. Campaign profiles review school budget elections held in twenty-four cities across the nation, listing four primary factors for each election (total school enrollment, total population of community or district, type of campaign, and amount of money sought), describing the campaign conducted for each, and telling the election results.

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- **Superintendents perceive cooperation between themselves and boards of education as the most important variable affecting success of bond elections** *(Hartman and Beal 1968).*

- **As voter turnout increases, chances for passage of school bond elections appear to decline** *(Overbeck 1969b).*

- **Use of most communications media is negatively related to election success** *(Beal, Lagomarcino, and Hartman 1966b).*

- **Strongest support for school bonds comes from parents of children in school and from new residents** *(Overbeck 1969b).*

- **Participation and dissent in school budget elections are highly related** *(Goettel 1971).*

- **Teacher salary increases do not affect participation and dissent** *(Goettel 1971).*

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